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5 Years of Iran-Iraq War: Toll May Be Near a Million

By DREW MIDDLETON

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LONDON, Sept. 22 — Five years of fighting between Iran and Iraq have resulted in a toll of war dead that may be approaching a million, according to intelligence estimates here.

The estimates in London and in other NATO capitals range from 420,000 to 580,000 Iranian dead, with the number of Iraqi dead put at 300,000.

Western intelligence officers agree that the number of deaths from wounds is high because most major operations have been carried out in intense heat, which kills the seriously wounded.

"We must accept an ultimate casualty total higher than anything experienced in the West since World War II," a senior intelligence official said.

The Persian Gulf war started on Sept. 21, 1980. It has entered its sixth year with Iraq, inferior in numbers but superior in advanced weapons, conducting a defensive war on the ground and a savage air offensive against Iran's oil-based economy.

Ten times in the last five weeks Iraqi bombers, some armed with French-made Exocet air-to-surface missiles, have attacked the Kharg island oil terminal. Of the 14 loading jetties at the terminal, only three are now intact, according to intelligence sources.

According to information reaching officials in London, the most recent Iraqi attacks, which occurred last Thursday, did grave damage to the installations and severely damaged two tankers loading at the base.

In the wake of the attack it was learned that Iran is chartering six supertankers to shuttle crude oil from Kharg to a makeshift terminal at Sirri Island, about 350 miles to the south and out of range of Iraqi aircraft.

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's regime in Teheran has threatened to close the narrow Strait of Hormuz to oil traffic if Iraqi bombing continues.

Although the major jetty on the eastern side of Kharg is among those that have been knocked out, intelligence sources report there are no indications that Iran has the resources or the will to block the Strait of Hormuz. One reason, these sources speculated, is the presence of a United States Navy squadron in the Indian Ocean and the probability that in a crisis it would be reinforced by British and French ships.

Concentrating on Kharg

The war is now concentrated on Kharg. One source said that in view of the "horrendous" Iranian casualties in land operations, further land offensives "should be out of the question." But he and other sources conceded that the fundamentalist Shiite Government in Teheran had paid scant attention to the rules of war and might throw half-trained, ill-armed Iranian infantry into further attacks against Iraqi positions.

The Iraqi Army, adequately armed with Soviet weapons, began the war in triumph. Hundreds of tanks, supported by Soviet-made fighters, advanced into southwestern Iran and at one point occupied nearly 400 square miles of Iranian territory. At that point, the Iranian Army was in a desperate position.

An estimated 10,000 officers of the Shah's army had been dismissed or jailed. The air force was short of spare parts and maintenance personnel.

In the summer of 1981 the ground fighting began to turn in Iran's favor. The invading Iraqis faced logistical difficulties. The defenders expanded their army by the hundreds of thousands, many of them children in their early teens, known as basij. Others were from the Revolutionary Guards, whose officers, new to war, seemed willing to lead attacks against the Iraqis.

The Iranian casualties were high. In 1982, according to an Iranian defector, about 5,000 basij died clearing a minefield in preparation for an attack on Bustan in southern Iran.

Similar attacks have been staged against the Iraqi port of Basra in the south and in northern sectors.

Establishment of a stalemate on the ground led President Saddam Hussein of Iraq and his military advisers to turn to an economic blockade of Iran.

Iran's resources for countering this offensive are limited. Its air force remains outnumbered and of inferior technology.

In a war of attrition, Iraq's position is growing stronger. A new pipeline recently laid to the Turkish coast is expected to increase oil exports by 50 percent. Another pipeline to the Saudi Arabian network and the Red Sea is about to go into operation.

Intelligence officers and oil experts wonder if there is an end in sight. The only one visible on the horizon, they said, would arise from the death of Ayatollah Khomeini and the recognition by his successors that the war cannot be won.